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ABSTRACT

The document presents a radio script about resettlement programs for contemporary Soviet Jewish refugees and problems and expectations concerning their acculturation and integration into American life. Part of a series entitled "Options in Education," it was produced by National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership. Two hosts interview various refugees and members of the organization who help them adjust. Topics covered include the young Soviets' reactions to New York City, a brief history of Soviet Jewish refugees, a detailed account of the organization which helps them resettle, the reasons for immigration, American Jews' expectations about the refugees, refugees' experiences in English as a Second Language in continuing education and in public school, vocational differences, and various personal services including educational and vocational programs. Emphasis is on acculturation and integration in the programs. The concluding section discusses parochial (Jewish) versus public schools, in relation to the benefits obtained by the refugees' children. Public schools are seen as conducive to rapid learning or English and rapid Americanization, parochial schools as teaching and preserving valued Jewish culture. (CK)

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SOVIET JEWISH REFUGEES

YOUNG SOVIETS' REACTIONS TO NEW YORK CITY

SPEAKER: It was like a bad dream. I just didn't understand how can there be so ugly place in such a big city, in New York.

SPEAKER: The city is really different, noisy, busy, everybody is hurrying to go into Manhatten. If you are in Manhatten it is very busy and dirty.

REINHARDT: What was the hardest thing to get used to for you?

SPEAKER: To speak English.

MERROW: Most refugees coming to the United States are going to be overwhelmed at first by the newness of their surroundings. They'll be lonely and homesick for the old country, unless there's a community waiting, willing to help them.

CALIFORNIA MAN WHO HELPS RESETTLE SOVIETS

SPEAKER: In one community that I worked in, the president of our agency owned a very large store, and was a respected business person in town. And they were really amazed when they came to their apartment. We hadn't quite finished fixing it up, and she was on the floor, on hands and knees, scrubbing the floor. And they couldn't imagine people doing this for them. And there were other people in the apartment, hanging curtains, making the bed, getting a meal ready. That was a real welcome.

MERROW: He helps resettle Soviet Jewish refugees. He's part of a well-oiled machine that provides food, clothing, education, job training, everything, for the 25,000 Soviet Jews arriving here this year.

I'm John Merrow, for NPR's Options in Education. My co-host, Barbara Reinhardt, is on assignment. Approximately 25,000 refugees from the Soviet Union are expected this year. 25,000 came last year, 13,000 in 1978. In all, about 70,000 since 1970. Most have settled in New York City, where there's an established network ready to help them adjust.

Our assistant producer, Rebecca Goldfield, spent several days in New York, talking with refugees and with those who are helping them adjust, including Michelle Mindlan.

MICHELLE MINDLAN AND THE JEWISH RESETTLEMENT "MACHINE"

MINDLAN: One of the things to put the experience of the Soviet Jew in perspective is the fact that the Jew has throughout history been a refugee. So the Soviet Jew who is now arriving is part of this pattern. Over the last 100 or so years, a machine has been put into place to receive the refugee and to make the refugee an integrated member of the American Jewish community.

What has happened is, over the years this machine has sort of faded but never died, and then come back into full existence, when the need arose, such as in the '30s when Hitler rose to power and in the late '40s when there were many people who were incarcerated in the concentration camps who came. And the machine somewhat faded away. And now, as more and more Soviets are coming, the machine has once again become a vital mechanism to acculturating and integrating the refugee

into the American mainstream.

GOLDFIELD: You just said American mainstream and before that you said Jewish American community. When these refugees come, are they expected to fit into the Jewish American community or to become Americans?

MINDLAN: I think that's a very difficult distinction to make. I think that they are Jews. There is no such thing in this country as a pure American. We're all American in some things. And in that way the Soviet, whether he chooses to identify himself in a secular way as a Jew or in a religious way, is still a Jew.

So become American means certain things, to have certain knowledge, to have certain values. But at the same time, the Jewishness is always there. The thing about Judaism is, no one -- there's not a hierarchy, and no one says, you are Jewish because you have fulfilled X, Y and Z, you're Jewish because you were born a Jew.

MERROW: Michelle Mindlan of the New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. Being born Jewish has been the ticket out of the Soviet Union. And how involved the refugees will now be with their religion is a central question.

SPEAKER: Since the Russian revolution, there's been no Jewish education allowed in the Soviet Union. And there -- the Communist Party in the Soviet Union preaches atheism, works very hard at discouraging religious beliefs, a theistic understanding of the world.

So although these people have maintained their Jewishness, their Jewish identity which in fact is the only reason they're out of the Soviet Union, is because they are Jews, the concept of Judaism for many is a non-theistic understanding. There is a cultural, there is an emotional, there is a historical identification that goes deeper than anybody would ever believe.

Somebody might not know very much about holidays. The average American non-Jew may know more about certain holidays than some Soviet Jews. But the identity, the commitment to Judaism, is indisputable. And what we're finding is that upon first arrival in the United States, there is a period of searching -- searching for the basic necessities of life. They need to have a job, they need to speak English, they need to be able to support themselves. They want to be self-sufficient. Those are the overwhelming desires at first.

Once those needs have begun to be met, they then can begin to explore their more existential existence. They then begin to explore, what does it mean to be Jewish. And a rough time is somewhere around the end of that first year. People begin to say, all right, what does it mean to be Jewish in America?

MERROW: Ralph Siegel of the Rogers Park Jewish Community Center in Chicago. Until recently, American Jews footed the entire bill, all the resettlement costs. And today are still paying more than half the costs. Do the American Jews expect anything in return? Well, some of the workers on the welcoming committees have had to adjust to the fact that the refugees are not what they expected -- not poor, devout Jews, but often highly educated, cosmopolitan professionals, Jewish ethnically, but not religiously.

AMERICAN JEWS HAD ROMANTIC NOTIONS ABOUT THE SOVIETS

GRUMBLATT: We all had romantic and unrealistic notions about who the Russian is. And when we meet them, they're people who have been deprived of their Jewish heritage and we have a job here on our hands. And to do the job, it takes money.

GOLDFIELD: What romantic images did you have?

GRUMBLATT: Well, every Jew thought that a Russian is a refuse-nix, and every Jew thought that Russians were some kind of hero because they even attempted to get out of Russia. What really happened was, the refuse-nix really are heroes, those people mostly went to Israel. And the people who came here were people who took advantage of the opportunity that they had a chance to get out of Russia.

And they were fine people, but not heroes, and not unusual in the sense that they were going to gravitate towards the synagogue where they can't understand the service. And I think we have to be a little more understanding and a little more realistic in terms of what our expectations are of the Russian.

GOLDFIELD: What are your expectations? What is the community's expectation?

GRUMBLATT: Well, by and large, the community's expectations are unrealistic. Those of us who have worked with Russians and understand them realize the tremendous task we have in terms of just giving the opportunity to learn.

MERROW: Esther Grumblatt. She runs a Jewish service center in Queens, part of New York City. She wants the newcomers to understand what being Jewish is all about, and what being American is all about. And so all sorts of services are provided, like this English As A Second Language class for mothers.

"ESL" CLASS FOR MOTHERS

TEACHER: Okay, "doesn't" is what two words? "Doesn't" is "does not," good. So, it's he does not drink. Okay. He does not drink tea. This is negative, right? What is positive? He drinks coffee, good. He drinks coffee, he does not drink tea, good.

MERROW: Kids get help, too. The 16-year-old is being tested for school placement.

TEACHER: I want you to look at all these pictures and tell me the story in the past tense. Do you know what the past tense is?

STUDENT: Yeah, what was already.

TEACHER: What was, yes. All right, now, start here, and tell me the story, but put it in the past tense.

STUDENT: John's got to have lunch.

TEACHER: To have lunch? To have is past?

STUDENT: No. Yeah, it's past.

TEACHER: Okay, and the next one?

STUDENT: In the afternoon he goes to buy shoes.

TEACHER: Uh-huh, and in the last one?

STUDENT: In the night he goes sleep.

TEACHER: Okay. Your comprehension is very good, your understanding of what we ask, the questions. Of course, the problem with this particular test is, there's no writing. But your understanding, your comprehension, is good. Your past tense, not so good. I think you belong in -- we'll try you in the second level. If that's too easy, then we'll put you in the third level. But I think that --

WOMAN GETTING HELP WITH A MALFUNCTIONING HEARING AID

MERROW: Some of the services are much more personal. An elderly woman came in needing help with her hearing aid.

SPEAKER: She keeps saying it moves in the back, Steve. It's very open, there's a little switch there and it moves very easily every time she puts a scarf on.

She's going to get a haircut, she says. Okay.

MERROW: The music makes them feel at home when they come in with problems like a malfunctioning hearing aid. But there's also a comprehensive educational and vocational program for adults. Half a day learning English, half a day learning a trade, while earning the minimum wage.

These adults are learning to make jewelry.

TEACHER: What are you making there?

STUDENT: Necklace.

TEACHER: What's the material you're using?

STUDENT: Metal, wire.

TEACHER: Is it copper?

STUDENT: Huh?

TEACHER: Is it copper, is it gold, is it silver, do you know?

STUDENT: Not gold.

TEACHER: Not gold?

STUDENT: I don't know name of metal.

TEACHER: Do you like doing it?

STUDENT: Yeah.

TEACHER: You like to make it.

STUDENT: Yeah, I like, I do.

TEACHER: Do you like to do it? Is it fun?

STUDENT: Yes, I like this.

TEACHER: And if you get a job doing this, would you like that?

STUDENT: Yes. Because when I do this, I don't look on time. I like this. Some people have job and they look on time and what time they come to home. But when I do this, I don't look on time. I like this.

TEACHER: Most of them are extremely artistic, most of them are well -- what do you call it, they want to learn. And most of them are very -- well, they're skillful, there's no denying it. That somehow or other they seem to be -- when it comes to handling the tools, comes t being creative, most of them are very good. Much more motivated than a lot of other people that come in there.

GOLDFIELD: So they pick it up well and they get jobs afterward?

TEACHER: Well, at least some of them, yes, and we hope to place more, though unfortunately the situation in the trade right now is kind of hectic. But we'll teach them, and -- shall I say it? I love to teach them.

MERROW: He teaches adult Soviet Jewish refugees how to make jewelry. Back in the Soviet Union, his students were musicians, journalists, psychiatrists, engineers and unskilled laborers. Here, they generally have to look for second careers, jobs that don't require perfect English. Michelle Mindlan.

VOCATIONAL DIFFERENCES REFUGEES MAY ENCOUNTER

MINDLAN: In the beginning, most of them find jobs that are somewhat -- well, a blue collar job. Very few are equipped to enter into a technical or professional job immediately. About a third of the Russians coming are professionals. For that third, over a period of years, they may be able to obtain a job which is analogous to what they held in the Soviet Union.

For many of the others, though, there needs to be a second career. They may have certain skills that are not useful in this country. There's also difficulty that the Soviet had with the way the American labor market is structured, because in the Soviet Union you are assigned to a job, you are assigned to a company. And they don't realize that your first job doesn't necessarily lock you in, that you cannot only move upwards, that you have upward mobility, but that you have lateral mobility.

And it's very difficult for the Soviet to realize it, because there's nothing in their life experience which would tell them that this is true. So they get a job initially, which may be menial, which may have a low wage, and in their own mind they're convinced that they're locked into this.

GOLDFIELD: What about the idea of trying to figure out what someone did in the Soviet Union, when you're trying to figure out what they'll do in the United States?

MINDLAN: In the Soviet Union, your identity is derived very much from your title. And because -- strangely, because it's an egalitarian society, in theory it then becomes a necessity to create hierarchies or status in other ways. And job title was a very important way to do this, so you'll have people who were textile engineers who really operated sewing machines. You'll have food processing engineers -- engineer seems

to be a big title attached to everyone, -- who worked in canneries. You'll have people who -- well, it even is different in other ways. If someone who legitimately was a psychiatrist in the Soviet Union, -- psychiatry in the Soviet Union is not based on interactive therapy, but is based on drugs and hospitalization, so that same psychiatrist will come to this country totally ill-equipped and ill-trained to be a psychiatrist, in our sense of the word.

So the question is, what happens to the person? Well, we have an example of a man who was a psychiatrist in the Soviet Union who is now working in one of our family agencies as a mental health para-professional. But this is the only way that he will begin to learn how mental health, the mental health field, works in this country. One day, hopefully, he will then be able to gain our training and perhaps again practice psychiatry. But he may never be able to. And that's one of the unfortunate things. And it's very difficult, because here's someone who was a professional, who may then never again be able to achieve this.

I think you need a sensitive vocational counselor to work with the person and say, but you do have certain strengths and let's work on these strengths. And let's go explore other directions you can go in.

MERROW: Michelle Mindlan of the New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. All these services, from learning to make jewelry to help with the malfunctioning hearing aid, are given to help the refugees get on their feet. Later, the givers hope, refugees will want to learn about their Jewish heritage.

Rebecca found one man whose experience seems typical. A scientist in the Soviet Union until six years ago, today he owns a fish market in Queens. He left the Soviet Union to escape anti-Semitism, but he doesn't consider himself religious.

REFUGEE SAYS HE IS NOT RELIGIOUS

SPEAKER: I wish I could believe in something, so I'll be very happy and very pleased if somebody will convince me to believe in something. I mean, I try -- I will try to, but I'm not --

GOLDFIELD: This is a predominantly Jewish area. Is there pressure on you to be religious?

SPEAKER: You mean here? No, no, not at all, no.

GOLDFIELD: Do you have children?

SPEAKER: Yes, I have two kids.

GOLDFIELD: Do you send them to school?

SPEAKER: Yes. One is in school. She's 13, she goes to yeshiva.

GOLDFIELD: Why -- if you're not religious, why do you send your daughter to the yeshiva instead of to the public school?

SPEAKER: I feel like I was handicapped this way, so why should my kids be handicapped this way?

GOLDFIELD: You want them to be religious, even though you're not.

SPEAKER: I would like them to understand what's going on in general, what it is, because I don't know. Let them think then later. I'm not sure they'll be religious in general, but I would like them to know our history, history of our people, the whole thing. And then decide what they want to do themselves.

MERROW: He sends his daughter to a yeshiva, a Jewish parochial school, in hopes that she'll learn enough about her religious and cultural heritage. Other parents send their kids to public school, ro learn English as quickly as possible.

PUBLIC SCHOOL "ESL" CLASS

TEACHER: In a year, all right, very good. How many weeks in a year?

STUDENT: 65 weeks.

TEACHER: No.

STUDENT: 52 weeks of the year.

TEACHER: All right, repeat that, then. There are --

STUDENT: There are 52 weeks in the year.

TEACHER: Very good. How many months in the year, Katya?

MERROW: It's an old dilemma, public versus private, non-sectarian versus religious school, assimilation into mainstream America, versus assimilation into the ethnic group. Some public schools try to satisfy both needs, with programs designed especially for the Soviet refugees, like this geography class, taught in Russian.

TEACHER: (Unintelligible -- foreign language.)

MERROW: Robert Goldberg is principal of that elementary school, P.S. 225 in Brooklyn.

GOLDBERG: I have a very warm feeling towards these people, because I'm just one generation removed from them. My parents came from a little stetl called Katznapoly on the border of Russian Poland. And I feel that these are basically my people. And when I see them, it is my pleasure to speak Yiddish with them. It brings me back to a feeling of home. And I do not, however, in any way impart any sense of religious training to them. That is not my intention, it is not my goal. It would alienate the children of other ethnic backgrounds from this school. And it is my intention to do or to maintain that rather old and certainly not totally outdated few, though some may think so. This country being a wonderful melting pot, that it will make all people live together.

MERROW: He told Rebecca that as a believer in the melting pot, he wants the refugees to learn English as quickly as possible.

GOLDBERG: We try within their first year to develop their abilities to speak English. And that is our major thrust. Now, since we do not have any attempt to teach them Hebrew or Yiddish, their time is spent largely with that one central idea. Subject matter is developed, of course, along -- as any aspect of the New York City curriculum would be developed. But there is no other language taught to these children. That was to some extent a question, because at one time we were considering the possi-

bility of going along with the espira consent, which indicated we're trying to teach them something which would maintain their culture. In general, the parents did object to this and did want to be integrated into the American society as quickly as possible, and were concerned about them learning English as quickly as possible. And that's been the thrust that we've been using.

As a matter of fact, we do have many that have spent some period of time in yeshiva and have picked up some facility in English. Many of our children have gone to Yeshiva first, leaving yeshiva because it doesn't meet their needs, doesn't meet their requirements, they don't feel -- the parents or the children do not feel that they are being integrated as rapidly as they would like to in this society. And so they do come into the public school.

And ours, bearing the reputation of one that is designed to help them do this, does attract a large number of them.

GOLDFIELD: Do you think that overall, these Russian Jewish children are better off with this kind of education, in terms of making adjustment to American society?

GOLDBERG: Clearly, I do. Clearly, it is my intention to involve these people in the life in America and to bring them to a feeling that they are a full developed citizen in this country, with all rights and all privileges that we all enjoy.

MERROW: Robert Goldberg, principal of an elementary school in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn, New York. Michelle Mindlan says that many refugees arrive here already convinced that public schools are not the place to send their children.

MINDLAN: It's interesting. Even when they're in Rome, they know that their child, for instance, shouldn't go to such-and-such a school because it's no good. They've heard, even back in Russia via the grapevine, that the public schools in New York City are not desirable. Therefore, they look towards yeshiva education, not so much because they want their child to have a religious education, but because they don't want their child to go to public school, which really places a great demand upon the yeshivas, because you very often will end up with children who don't understand, who are becoming exposed to the religion, and parents at home who have no idea what's happening to their child in school.

And I'm sure there's more than one case of a child coming to yeshiva with a ham sandwich for lunch, because the parent doesn't understand the laws of Kashra.

GOLDFIELD: What are they told about the schools not being desirable? What does a Russian hear in Russia that tells them to avoid the public schools in New York City?

MINDLAN: That they're rough, that education isn't good. Soviets are very, very concerned about the quality of education. They're very used to strict, pedagogical types of learning experiences. There's an unknown and therefore a fearful element about the minorities because there are not Hispanic and black minorities in the Soviet Union. The minorities in the Soviet Union if they exist at all are ethnic minorities.

MERROW: More than rumors via the grapevine pull parents toward a yeshiva education. Often the welcoming committees will pay for the first year or two of schooling. Then, too, the yeshiva offers

a full day program that doesn't end at 3:00 the way public school does. And that's important for parents who work long hours.

GLENN RICHTER ON PAROCHIAL SCHOOLS

Glenn Richter says that what's important for the kids is the secure foundation of the Jewish-oriented education at a yeshiva.

RICHTER: First of all, I don't believe in the vast melting pot theory. I think the strength of America is in its pluralism. And I think one of the most horrific things that has taken place in the United States is the mistaken belief that you have to Americanize. Going through a Jewish parochial system, a yeshiva, a day school, or any one of these, provides an anchor of who you are, provides some form of a structure within which you operate. And I've seen kids go through both structures, and I would say that the kids who go through a Jewish parochial structure, or at least some form of that, being given some form of, let's say, Jewish identity, Jewish pride, come out much better in the end in their heads than kids who are simply thrown into a public school to sink or swim and who are made to feel that they have to become Americans.

I think that the worst fault of any Jewish organization that has in the past dealt with immigrants, is that they sought to Americanize rather than to Judaize. And again, we're not speaking about demanding a level of religious practice or whatever. We're asking that a person acquire some form of education in order to make a choice about his own identity.

MERROW: Glenn Richter, of the students' struggle for Soviet Jewry in New York City. Compared with many other refugee groups, Soviet Jews are fortunate. They're met here by a strong support network. Vocational counselling and training are available, along with job placement.

Parochial schools already exist for the children. Ironically, they may end up disappointing their American helpers by coming too American, and not Jewish enough. But other refugees, like those from Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos, find a far less comprehensive support system when they arrive. They face far more formidable obstacles. That's next, on Options in Education.

A transcript of this program, Soviet Jewish refugees, is available for one dollar. The cassette recording costs $3.50. Write us at National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036. The transcript, one dollar, cassette recording, $3.50. And our address once more, National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036.

GOLDFIELD: Was it very hard to get used to being here?

STUDENT: Yeah. I didn't know anybody, I thought I would never have any friends, I would never talk to anybody. That's all. I was very shy, talking to people.

GOLDFIELD: You're not now.

STUDENT: No.

MERROW: Options in Education is a co-production of National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University. Support for this series is provided by

the National Institute of Education and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Our assistant producer, Rebecca Goldfield, gathered most of the material for this program, but we also had help from Paul Freiberger in San Francisco and Jill Dougherty in Chicago. Mary Rowse is our associate producer, with technical assistance by Alan Corbeth. Barbara Reinhardt will be back next week.

I'm John Merrow, and this is NPR -- National Public Radio.